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Focus

The Environment And U.S.

—Ashish Kothari

Our attention is being slowly drawn towards our environment. The recent creation of a Department of Environment at the Centre clearly indicates this. One feels happy that there are a few in Hindu Collage who are taking active part in this movement.

MOST of us today don't realize that we are growing up into an increasingly dangerous world. We, the youth are the inheritors of a mutilated, ravaged earth which may soon no longer be able to sustain us as it has been sustaining our ancestors for millions of years. Our surroundings are becoming more and more poisonous, our natural resources are rapidly dying out. In our mad rush for progress, modernisation and comfort, we have ignored something we cannot afford to ignore—what we do to our environment, we do to ourselves.

But really, why all this hullabaloo over the 'environment', why this sudden craze in what has been called a 'Western elitist fad'? Why the talk of setting up a Ministry or Department of Environment, why the fuss over Silent Valley and Taj Mahal? The answers may be easier to understand if we look at the two basic ways in which our environment is disrupted—destruction of natural areas (especially forests), and pollution of our surroundings. Let's take the first—deforestation, i.e. the cutting of our woodlands. This has an instantaneous disastrous effect on those millions of rural villagers who used to get all the essentials of life—water, fodder, fuelwood, compost, fibres—from forests.

But then, you'll say, these are people still in a stage of 'primitive existence', still under the grip of nature. We, secure in our cities, have "conquered" nature and have nothing to fear. Really? Are we all that safe? Remember the floods in Delhi last year?

There's a hill in Uttar Pradesh which was once covered with forests, overlooking the



Yamuna river. Every year the rain fell, was absorbed by the tree canopy and slowly trickled down to form underground reservoirs. A few years back, the forest was cut down, and the wood transported to paper mills. The rain fell, but there was nothing left to absorb it. It rushed straight down the hill into the Yamuna, carrying with it tons of loose soil. The river bed rose, the banks overflowed, water gushed down to the plains, and caused floods the like of which Delhi had never experienced. I ask those of us living in the areas of north Delhi which were flooded—are we all that safe?

The destruction of forests, probably our most important natural resource, may one day be our deathblow. But as if that weren't enough, humanity has long been devising other ingenious methods to progress down the suicide road. Take the case of pollution. Drink the cool sweet water of the Yamuna at its source in Uttar Pradesh, then come down and drink the dirty, poisonous water at Delhi, and you'll know what water pollution is. Breathe in the fresh rich air of the Indian countryside, then come and breath the suffocating, noxious air beside the Indra-prastha Power Station in Delhi, and you'll know what air pollution is. Lend your ears to the peaceful tranquility of a forest, then spend a day amidst the shattering babel of Darya Ganj. and you'll know what noise pollution is.

Pollution of the air and water—caused by emissions from industries and vehicles, sewage and garbage from our homes—is a major cause of deadly diseases which inflict millions of people worldwide. It is also resulting in a drop in the productivity of our fisheries and farms, and killing off large numbers of wildlife. Noise pollution can cause deafness (16000 victims in a single year in Sweden !), nervous disorders and mental disturbances which may even be fatal. The list of harmful effects of pollution is endless.

There are three basic points I am trying to put across here. First, that though this environmental crisis is largely the making of generations before us and of those who are at the helm of political and economic power today, we ourselves are contributing a great deal. Consider the enormous paper wastage we indulge in every day—it means the cutting of more life supporting forests. Consider the garbage we're throwing around carelessly—ultimately it washes down to the rivers and pollutes them. Consider the excessive amount of gas, petrol, electricity etc. that we burn up—can we afford to waste such scarce resources ?

Second, these acts both by us and by irresponsible industrialists, contractors, and politicians, ultimately backfire, to our own detriment. It was recently found that children in some Bombay areas were drinking

poisoned milk—the startling reason was that the cattle had been drinking polluted water ! Another equally startling chain reaction could go like this—we use too much paper, causing the destruction of forests, leading to disruption of climate and rainfall patterns and to the spread of deserts, resulting in drought and dust-storms affecting our health ! Would you believe that 10,000 tons of dust falls on Delhi every day, and the only effective check are trees ?

Third, and most importantly, we are the ones who can save the situation. We have the youth power to organise and pressurise our elders into stopping this wholesale destruction. We have the guidance of a few committed conservationists, people like Dr. Richard Baker (recently in Delhi) who, through his untiring efforts has saved the majestic Redwood forests of California and pioneered ways to reclaim the Sahara. We have the support of an increasingly sympathetic mass media. The point is, are we willing to do it ? Do we have the motivation to do it ? We may not be convinced by statements saying that its a fight for our survival, because we live a fairly comfortable life and foresee no great dangers to ourselves. It may only be when the floods are upon us, or when some of us die after drinking polluted water, that we may be aroused to act. But won't that be too late ?

We must act now. There are several things we can do at our own level—plant and protect trees, reduce wastage of paper, oil, electricity, water, etc., stop careless littering, control our noise level of over 110 decibels, whereas human safety level is around 80 ?), hold demonstrations, and spread the message around to build up a greater pressure group.

One such pressure group has sprung up in Delhi. 'KALPAVRIKSHA', as we call ourselves (after a tree in Indian mythology), is an informal group of students interested mainly in action. We have successfully protested against the destruction of Delhi's largest natural forests on the Ridge — and got it declared as a 'Protected Area'. We've undertaken a trek-cum-survey in the Garhwal hills to judge the extent of environmental destruction and subsequent social disruption there, and made

(Contd on page 8)